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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LUANDA 000556

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SUBJECT: AS ELECTIONS APPROACH... WILL ANGOLA BE READY?

REF: LUANDA 0555

Classified By: AMB DAN MOZENA FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: With Angola's legislative elections (the first in 16 years) only 45 days away, the National Election Commission (CNE) has made impressive progress in making arrangements for the polls, but daunting challenges remain. Challenges include timelines required to print and distribute the ballots before the September 5 election day, hiring and training the tens of thousands of personnel needed to staff over 13,000 polling stations, and establishing reliable communication links with polling stations in isolated areas of this huge country. Despite these and other issues, USAID-sponsored NGO's working with the CNE, various political parties, and civil society as they prepare for elections agree that the election process will be largely peaceful and credible, though the playing field will hardly be level given the ruling party's huge incumbent advantage of incumbency. Even the leader of the main opposition party is generally positive about the election process. END SUMMARY

THE ELECTION COMMISSION'S PERSPECTIVE

¶2. (C) During a July 15 meeting with the Ambassador, CNE President Caetano de Sousa declared that "almost everything is now ready for the elections," noting that the CNE has received almost all shipments of election materials and that work is underway to organize and train the people needed to staff the polling stations. Queried about possible challenges, Caetano offered communications as his biggest problem at the moment. He said the CNE has already set up communication links from municipal headquarters to provincial capitals and on to Luanda, but he seeks to expand this net and create redundant capacity for reporting results by providing each of the over 13,000 polling stations its own direct telecommunication link with the provincial capital and Luanda. He was not sanguine, however, that he would succeed in this endeavor. Asked about access to localities where roads are still impassable due to landmines and destroyed bridges, Caetano waved away the problem, declaring that the CNE would have sufficient mobility by air to get to all such locations.

¶3. (C) Caetano was clearly uncomfortable in addressing the Ambassador's concerns regarding whether there would be enough time to print and distribute millions of paper ballots across the country. The Ambassador noted the contradiction between the demand by the Spanish printing/ distributing company for a minimum of 60 days to complete the task on the one hand, and the likelihood that the final roster of eligible parties and coalitions and their respective positions on the ballots (as determined by a lottery) would not be known until early August on the other hand. The complicating factor is the time required for the Constitutional Court's assessment of whether parties have satisfied requirements to be included on the ballots (due July 22), the 10 day "complaint" period for excluded parties, and the 2 days needed to conduct the lottery. With a grim smile, Caetano acknowledged the

question as "a good one," adding that somehow the CNE would negotiate an accommodation with the printer. When queried whether the CNE would need to postpone the elections to allow more time to print and distribute ballots, Caetano responded with a swift negative.

14. (C) When asked about the European Union's frustration over the GRA's failure to sign two MOU's needed before the EU could dispatch its electoral observation mission to Angola, Caetano was dismissive of the EU's concerns. He asserted that Angolan law already provided the assurances sought by the EU and noted the GRA does not want to establish a precedent for signing MOU's with all international observers.

Caetano added that the CNE will provide all observers access to information, ensure safety and security, and an issue a kit for observers. In response to the ambassador's query about getting credentials for Embassy observers, Caetano said the CNE would invite international organizations to observe and the Embassy would receive needed information "next week."

(NOTE: Ambassador's follow-up conversation with European Commission Acting Head of Delegation Robert Holder revealed a different take on the situation, declaring the MOU's are under "intense discussion," and are essential if the observers are to do their work credibly. He cited as an example the prohibition under Angolan law of the observers moving freely anywhere at any time. The observers could not do their oversight credibly unless the conditions were clearly defined at the outset, a lesson Holder said the EU learned the hard way in Nigeria and Mozambique. END NOTE)

ANOTHER VIEW FROM INSIDE THE CNE TENT

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15. (C) According to the American NGO IFES, the only NGO invited by the CNE to help them prepare for the elections, the CNE is moving ahead "very diligently" to organize credible elections, but is lagging behind its own timetable. During a July 14th meeting with the Ambassador, IFES staff said the CNE had established offices in all provincial capitals and in most of the nation's 163 municipalities. IFES played a major role in developing the integrated logistics plan that details all prerequisites for conducting the elections. In comparison with IFES experience in other African countries the CNE is moving ahead well in some areas, such as setting up a massive operations center at the modern Talatona Convention Center, identifying the locations of the 13,000 polling stations, and procuring the election kits needed to set up each polling station. In other areas, however, the CNE is seriously behind, such as training the personnel needed to staff the four voting booths at each of the 13,000 stations. Even more concerning is the seeming lack of sufficient time to print and distribute the estimated 11 million ballots, a problem the Ambassador subsequently raised directly with Caetano, as reported above.

16. (C) Despite the many challenges, IFES staff remain hopeful the process will produce credible elections. They report "a lot of goodwill at the CNE" and "no indications from any of the political parties that they would undermine the process." The two-person IFES team currently here will shortly be increased by four more experts to assist with advising the CNE. The head of IFES in Angola said IFES has a "very good relationship" with CNE and is now being made to feel welcome and part of the CNE team.

THE VIEW FROM THE GROUND LEVEL

17. (C) During a July 18 working dinner hosted by the Ambassador with several key NGO's that are engaged in grassroots election preparations throughout the nation (National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, and Development Workshop), a consensus quickly emerged that the coming elections would be peaceful. None

discerned evidence of any political party seeking to influence the political process through an orchestrated campaign of violence or overt physical intimidation. They acknowledged, however, that there likely could be scattered incidents of localized violence, which would not influence the overall credibility of the elections. The NGO representatives predicted that voter turn-out for the elections would be high, though the electorate so far lacks the idealism, hope, and interest that had characterized the nation's first elections in 1992, which had been witnessed first-hand by several at the dinner.

¶18. (C) One NGO representative who had been deeply involved in the 1992 electoral process noted that if the former election is any guide, the 30 day formal campaign period immediately before the September 5 polling would have an significant impact on how people vote, thus complicating efforts now to assess the likely election outcome. The situation is further complicated in rural areas by the unknown impact of the traditional leaders (sobas) who are selected and paid by the government, which is synonymous with the ruling party in the eyes of many (reftel).

THE VIEW FROM OPPOSITION PARTY HEADQUARTERS

¶19. (C) In a July 3rd meeting with the Ambassador, UNITA President Isaias Samakuva spent more time discussing UNITA's concerns with a proposal, which was later rejected (septel), to extend elections to two days than discussing any other component of his campaign. When pressed for what his other concerns might be, Samakuva ventured that campaign financing was always an issue, as was striking the right balance between a vocal, active opposition party which raises legitimate concerns and hitting a strident tone that reminds voters of the party's more militant past. Samakuva expressed his belief that Angolans are excited about elections due to their desire for change, which he predicts will drive voters to the polls to the benefit of his party.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: The coming elections, like so much else that the GRA does, will be cobbled together somehow in the end, and we can comfortably predict delayed polling station openings in some areas, supply shortages, ill-trained personnel staffing the stations, and confused, frustrated voters. Whether these logistical snags will be sufficiently pervasive to undermine the credibility of the elections remains to be seen, but interestingly all of our NGO interlocutors are upbeat about the elections, assessing that in the end, despite predictable blemishes and shortcomings,

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the elections will be credible. Of course, whether the electoral playing field will be level is a different question. Given the ruling party's virtual monopoly on the nationwide electronic, radio, and print media, its widespread patronage system right down to the village level, its deep pockets, and all the other perks of incumbency, the political playing field in Angola is far from level. Nonetheless, if Angola's elections are indeed peaceful and credible as expected, that would be an important step in bolstering the nation's emerging democratic institutions, setting the stage for presidential and local elections over the next two years, and giving the world an example of African elections that work. END COMMENT
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